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·HOW·TO·KNOW·
·THE·WILL·OF·GOD·



by
HENRY DRUMMOND

**INTERCHURCH WORLD MOVEMENT
OF NORTH AMERICA
111 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY**



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HOW TO KNOW THE WILL OF GOD

"If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."—JOHN 7, 17.

HERE is an experience which becomes more and more familiar to every one who is trying to follow Christ—a feeling of the growing loneliness of this Christian life. It comes from a sense of the peculiarly personal interest which Christ takes in him, which sometimes seems so strong as almost to make him feel that his life is being detached from all other lives around him, that it is being drawn out of the crowd of humanity as if an unseen arm linked in his were taking him aside for a nearer intimacy and a deeper and more private fellowship. It is not, indeed, that the great family of God are to be left in the shade for him, or that he is in any way the favorite of heaven; but the sanctifying and, in the truest sense, humbling realization that God makes himself as real to each poor unit as if he were the whole; so that even as in coming to

Christ at first he felt himself the only lost, so now in staying with Christ he feels himself the only found. And it is, perhaps, true, that without any loss in the feeling of saintly communion with all those throughout the world who say "Our Father" with him in their prayers, the more he feels that Christ has all of him to Himself the more he feels that he has Christ all to himself. Christ has died for other men, but in a peculiar sense for him. God has a love for all the world, but a peculiar love for him. God has an interest in all the world, but a peculiar interest in him. This is always the instinct of a near fellowship, and it is true of the universal fellowship of God with his own people.

But if there is one thing more than another which is more personal to the Christian—more singularly his than God's love or God's interest—one thing which is a finer symbol of God's love and interest, it is the knowledge of God's will — the private knowledge of God's will. And it is more personal, just inasmuch as it is more private. My private portion of God's love is only a private *share* in God's love—only a part—the same in quality and kind as all the rest of God's love, as all the others get from God. But God's will is a thing for myself.

There is a will of God for me which is willed for no one else besides. It is not a *share* in the universal will, in the same sense as I have a share in the universal love. It is a particular will for me, different from the will He has for any one else—a private will—a will which no one else knows about, which no one can know but me.

To be sure, as we have seen before, God had likewise a universal will for me and every man. But this is more than that. In the Ten Commandments, in conscience, in the beatitudes of Christ, God tells all the world his will. There is no secret about this part, it is as universal as his love. It is the will on which the character of every man is to be formed and conformed to God's.

But there is a will for career as well as for character. There is a will for *where*—in what place, viz., in this town or another town—I am to become like God as well as *that* I am to become like God. There is a will for where I am to be, and what I am to be, and what I am to do tomorrow. There is a will for what scheme I am to take up, and what work I am to do for Christ, and what business arrangements to make, and what money to give away. This is God's private will for me, for every step I

take, for the path of life along which he points my way,—God's will for my *career*.

If I have God's will in my character, my life may become great and good. It may be useful and honorable, and even a monument of the sanctifying power of God. But it will only be a *life*. However great and pure it be, it can be no more than a life. And it ought to be a *mission*. There should be no such thing as a Christian *life*, each life should be a *mission*.

God has a life-plan for every human life. In the eternal counsels of his will, when he arranged the destiny of every star, and every sand-grain and grass-blade, and each of those tiny insects which live but for an hour, the Creator had a thought for you and me. Our life was to be the slow unfolding of this thought, as the corn-stalk from the corn, or the flower from the gradually opening bud. It was a thought of what we were to be, of what we might become, of what *he* would have us do with our days and years, or influence with our lives. But we all had the terrible power to evade this thought, and shape our lives from another thought, from another will, if we chose. The bud could only become a flower, and the star revolve in the orbit God had fixed. But it was man's prerogative to choose his

path, his duty to choose it in God. But the divine right to choose at all has always seemed more to him than his duty to choose in God, so, for the most part, he has taken his life *from God*, and cut his career from himself.

It comes to pass, therefore, that there are two great classes of people in the Christian world today. (1) Those who have God's will in their character; (2) those who have God's will likewise in their career. The first are in the world to live. They have a *life*. The second are in the world to minister. They have a *mission*.

Now those who belong to the first class, those who are simply living in the world and growing character, however finely they may be developing their character, cannot understand too plainly that they are not fulfilling God's will. They are really outside a great part of God's will altogether. They understand the universal part, they are molded by it, and their lives as *lives* are in some sense noble and true. But they miss the private part, the secret whispering of God in the ear, the constant message from earth to heaven. "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" They never have the secret joy of asking a question like this, the wonderful sense in asking it, of being in the

counsels of God, the overpowering thought that God has taken notice of you, and your question—that he will let you do something, something peculiar, personal, private, which no one else has been given to do—this which gives life for God is true sublimity and makes a perpetual sacrament of all its common things. Life to them is at the best a bare and selfish thing, for the truest springs of action are never moved at all, and the strangest thing in human history, the bounding of the career from step to step, from circumstances to circumstances, from tragedy to tragedy, is unexplained and unrelated, and hangs, a perpetual mystery, over life.

The great reason possibly why so few have thought of taking God into their career is that so few have really taken God into their *life*. No one ever thinks of having God in his career, or need think, until his life is fully molded into God's. And no one will succeed in knowing even what God in his career can mean till he knows what it is to have God in the secret chambers of his heart. It requires a well kept life to know the will of God, and none but the Christ-like in character can know the Christ-like in career.

It has happened, therefore, that the very fact of God's guidance in the individual life has been denied. It is said to give life an importance quite foreign to the divine intention in making man. One life, it is argued, is of no more importance than any other life, and to talk of special providences happening every hour of every day is to detract from the majesty and dignity of God, that, in fact, it reduces a religious life to a mere religious caprice, and the thought that God's will is being done to a hallucination of the mind.

And there is another side to the objection, which though less pronounced and definite, subtly dangerous still—that there does indeed seem to be some warrant in Scripture for getting to know the will of God; but that, in the first place, *that* probably means only on great occasions which come once or twice in a lifetime; and, in the second, that the whole subject is so obscure that, all things considered, a man had better walk by his own common sense, and leave such mysteries alone.

But the Christian cannot allow the question to be put off with poor evasions like these. Every day, indeed, and many times a day, the question rises in a hundred practical forms. "What is the will of God for

me?" What is the will of God for me today, just now, for the next step, for this arrangement and for that, and this amusement, and this projected work for Christ? For all these he feels he must consult the will of God, and that God has a will for him in all such things, and that it must be possible *somehow* to know what that will is, is not only a matter of hope, but a point in his doctrine and creed.

But in order to vindicate the *reasonableness* of such expectations as these, it may simply be affirmed as a matter of fact that there *are* a number of instruments for finding out the will of God. One of them is a very great instrument, so far surpassing all the rest in accuracy that there may be said to be but one which has never been known to fail. The others are smaller and clumsier, much less delicate, indeed, and often fail. They often fail to come within sight of the will of God at all, and are so far astray at other times as to mistake some other thing for it. Still they are instruments, and notwithstanding their defects, have a value by themselves, and when the greater instrument employs their humbler powers to second its attempts, immediately become as keen and as unerring as itself.

The most important of these minor instruments is reason, and although it is a minor instrument, it is great enough in many a case to reveal the secret will of God. God is taking your life and character through a certain process, for example. He is running your career along a certain chain of events. And sometimes the light which he is showing you stops, and you have to pick your way for a few steps by the dimmer light of thought. But it is God's will for you then to use this thought, and to elevate it through regions of concentration, into faith, and to walk by this light till the clearer beam from his will comes back again.

Another of these instruments is *experience*. There are many paths in life which we all tread more than once. God's light was by us when we walked them first, and lit a beacon here and there along the way. But the next time he sent our lines along that path he knew the side-lights should be burning still, and let us walk alone.

And then there is circumstance. God closes things in around us till our alternatives are all reduced to one. That one, if we must act, is probably the will of God just then.

And then there is the advice of others—an important element at least—and the welfare of others, and the example to others, and the many other facts and principles which make up the moral man, which, if not strong enough always to discover what God's will is, are not too feeble oftentimes to determine what it is *not*.

Even the best of these instruments, however, has but little power in its own hands. The ultimate appeal is always to the one great Instrument, which uses them in turn as it requires, and which supplements their discoveries, or even supplants them if it choose by its own superior light, and might, and right. It is like some great glass that can sweep the skies in the darkest night, and trace the motion of the furthest stars, while all the rest can but see a faint uncertain light piercing for a moment here and there the clouds which lie between.

And this great instrument for finding out God's will, this instrument which can penetrate where reason cannot go, where observation has not been before, and memory is helpless, and the guiding hand of circumstance has failed, has a name which is seldom associated with any end so great, a name which every child may understand, even as the stupendous instrument itself with

all its mighty powers is sometimes moved by infant hands when others have tried in vain.

The name of this instrument is *obedience*. Obedience, as it is sometimes expressed, is the organ of spiritual knowledge. As the eye is the organ of physical sight; the mind, of intellectual sight; so the organ of spiritual vision is this strange power, obedience.

This is one of the great discoveries the Bible has made to the world. It is purely a Bible thought. Philosophy never conceived a truth so simple and yet so sublime. And, although it was known in Old Testament times and expressed in Old Testament books, it was reserved for Jesus Christ to make the full discovery to the world, and add to His teaching another of the profoundest truths which have come from heaven to earth—that the mysteries of the Father's will are hid in this word "obey."

The circumstances in which Christ made the great discovery to the world are known to every one.

The Feast of Tabernacles was in progress in Jerusalem when Jesus entered the temple to teach. A circle of Jews were gathered round him who seem to have been spell-bound with the extraordinary wisdom of his words. He made no pretension to be a

scholar. He was no graduate of the Rabbinical schools. He had no access to the sacred literature of the people. Yet here was this stranger from Nazareth confounding the wisest heads in Jerusalem, and unfolding with calm and effortless skill such truths as even these temple walls had never heard before. Then "the Jews marveled, saying, 'how knoweth this man letters, never having learned?'" What organ of spiritual knowledge can he have, never having learned? *Never having learned*—they did not know that Christ *had* learned. They did not know the school at Nazareth whose teacher was in heaven — whose schoolroom was a carpenter's shop—the lesson, the Father's will. They knew not that hidden truths could come from God, or wisdom from above.

What came to them was gathered from human books, or caught from human lips. They knew no organ save the mind; no instrument of knowing the things of heaven but that by which they *learned* in the schools. But Jesus pointed to a spiritual world which lay still far beyond, and tells them of the spiritual eye which reads its profounder secrets and reveals the mysteries of God. "My doctrine is not mine," He says, "but His that sent me"; and "My

judgment is just," as He taught before, "because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." And then, lest men should think this great experience was never meant for them, He applies His principles to every human mind which seeks to know God's will. "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."

The word doctrine here is not to be taken in our sense of the word doctrine. It is not the doctrine of theology. "Any man" is to know if he will do His will. But it is God's teaching—God's mind. If any man will do His will, he shall know God's mind; he shall know God's teaching and God's will.

In this sense, or indeed in the literal sense, from the first look at these words it appears almost as if a contradiction were involved. To *know* God's will, it is as much as to say, *Do God's* will. But how are we to *do God's* will *until* we know it? To *know* it; that is the very dilemma we are in. And it seems no way out of it to say, *Do* it and you shall *know* it. We want to know it, in order to do it; and now we are told to do it, in order to know it! If any man *do*, he shall *know*.

But that is not the meaning of the words. That is not even the words themselves. It

is not, If any man *do*, he shall know; but if any man *will* do. And the whole sense of the passage turns upon that word *will*. It means, "If any man *is willing* to do, he shall know." He does not need to *do* His will in order to know, he only need be willing to do it. For "will" is not at all the sign of the future tense as it looks. It is not connected with the word *do* at all, but a separate verb altogether, meaning "is willing," or "wills." If any man wills, or if any man is willing, to do, he shall know.

Now notice the difference this makes in the problem. Before, it looked as if the doing were to come first and then the knowing His will; but now another element is thrown in at the very beginning. The being willing comes first and then the knowing; and thereafter the doing may follow—the doing, that is to say, if the will has been sufficiently clear to proceed.

The whole stress of the passage therefore turns on this word will. And Christ's answer to the question, How to know the will of God? may be simply stated thus: "If any man is willing to do God's will he shall know," or, in plainer language still, "If any man is sincerely *trying* to do God's will, he shall know."

The connection of all this with obedience is just that being willing is the highest form

of obedience. It is the spirit and essence of obedience. There is an obedience in the world which is no obedience, because the *act* of obedience is there, but the spirit of submission is not.

“A certain man,” we read in the Bible, “had two sons; and he came to the first and said ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ He answered ‘*I will not*’: but afterward he repented and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered, ‘I go, sir’ and went not Which of the two did the will of the father?” (Mat. 21: 28-31). Obedience here comes out in its true colors as a thing in the will. And if any man have an obeying will, a truly single and submissive will, he shall know of the teaching, or of the leading, whether it be of God.

If we were to carry out this principle into a practical case, it might be found to work in some such way as this. Tomorrow, let us say, there is some difficulty before us in our path. It lies across the very threshold of our life, and we cannot begin the working week without, at least, some notice that it is there. It may be some trifling item of business life, over which unaccountable suspicions have begun to gather of late, and force themselves in spite of everything into thought and conscience, and even into prayer. Or, it may be, some change of cir-

cumstance is opening up, and alternatives appearing, and demanding choice of one. Perhaps it is some practice in our life, which the clearing of the spiritual atmosphere and increasing light from God is hinting to be wrong, while reason cannot coincide exactly and condemn. At all events there is something on the mind—something to do, to suffer, to renounce—and these are alternative on the mind to distinguish, to choose from, to reject. Suppose, indeed, we made this case a personal as well as an illustrative thing, and in view of the solemn ordinance to which we are shortly called, we ran the lines of our self-examination along it as we proceed—the question rises, how are we to separate God's light on the point from our own, disentangle our thoughts on the point from His, and be sure we are following His will, not the reflected image of ours?

The first process towards this discovery *naturally* would be one of outlook. *Naturally* we would set to work by collecting all the possible materials for decision from every point of the compass, balancing the one consequence against the other, then summing up the points in favor of each by itself, until we chose the one which emerged at last with most of reason on its side. But this would only be the natural man's way

out of the dilemma. The spiritual man would go about it in another way. This way, he would argue, has no religion in it at all, except perhaps the acknowledgment that reason is divine; and though it might be quite possible and even probable that the light should come to him through the medium of reason, yet he would reach his conclusion, and likely enough a different conclusion, quite from another side.

And his conclusion would likewise be a better and sounder conclusion, for the insight of the non-religious method would be impaired and the real organ of knowing God's will so out of order from disuse, that even reason would be biased in its choice. A heart not quite subdued to God is an imperfect element, in which His will can never live; and the intellect which belongs to such a heart is an imperfect instrument and cannot find God's will unerringly—for God's will is found in regions which obedience only can explore.

Accordingly, he would go to work from the opposite side from the first. He would begin not in out-look, but in in-look. He would not give his mind to observation. He would devote his soul to self-examination, to self-examination of the most solemn and searching kind. For this principle of Christ

is no concession to an easy life, or a careless method of rounding a difficult point. It is a summons rather to learn the highest and most sacred thing in heaven, by bracing the heart to the loftiest and severest sacrifice on earth—the bending of an unwilling human will till it breaks in the will of God. It means that the heart must be watched with a jealous care, and most solemnly kept for God. It means that the hidden desires must be taken out one by one and regenerated by Christ—that the faintest inclination of the soul when touched by the spirit of God, be prepared to assume the strength of will and act at any cost. It means that nothing in life should be dreaded so much as that the soul should ever lose its sensitiveness to God; that God should ever speak and find the ear just dull enough to miss what He has said: that God should have some active will for some human will to do, and our heart not the first in the world to be ready to obey.

When we have attained to this by meditation, by self-examination, by commemoration, and by the Holy Spirit's power, we may be ready to make it our daily prayer, that we may know God's will; and when the heart is prepared like this, and the wayward will is drilled in sacrifice and patience to

surrender all to God, God's will may come out in our career at every turning of our life, and be ours not only in sacramental aspiration but in act.

To search for God's will with *such* an instrument is scarce to search at all. God's will lies transparently in view at every winding of the path; and if perplexity sometimes comes, in such way as has been supposed, the mind will gather the phenomena into the field of vision, as carefully, as fully, as laboriously, as if no light would come at all, and then stand still and wait till the wonderful discerning faculty of the soul, that eye which beams in the undivided heart and looks right out to God from every willing mind, fixes its gaze on one far distant spot, one spot perhaps which is dark to all the world besides, where all the lights are focused in God's will.

How this finite and this infinite are brought to touch, *how* this invisible will of God is brought to the temporal heart must ever remain unknown. The mysterious meeting-place in the prepared and willing heart between the human and divine—where, precisely, the will is finally moved into line with God's—of these things knoweth no man save only the Spirit of God.

“The wind bloweth where it listeth. We

hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth.” When every passion is annihilated, and no thought moves in the mind and all the faculties are still and waiting for God, the spiritual eye may trace, perhaps, some delicate motion in the soul, some thought which stirs like a leaf in the unseen air and tells that *God* is there. It is not the stillness, nor the unseen breath, nor the thought that only *stirred*, but these three mysteries in one which reveal God’s will to me. God’s light, it is true, does not supersede, but illuminate our thoughts. Only when God sends an angel to trouble the pool let us have faith for the angel’s hand, and believe that some power of heaven has stirred the waters in our soul.

Let us but get our hearts in position for knowing the will of God—only, let us be willing to know God’s will in our hearts that we may *do* God’s will in our lives, and we shall raise no questions as to how this will may come and feel no fears in case the heavenly light should go.

But let it be remembered, as already said, that it requires a well-kept life to will to do this will. It requires a well-kept life to *do* the will of God, and even a *better* kept life to *will* to do His will. To be *willing* is a

rarer grace than to be *doing* the will of God. For he who is *willing* may sometimes have nothing to *do*, and must only be *willing* to *wait*: and it is easier far to be *doing* God's will than to be *willing* to have *nothing to do* — it is easier far to be *working* for Christ than it is to be willing to *cease*. No, there is nothing rarer in the world today than the truly willing soul, and there is nothing more worth coveting than the will to will God's will.

There is no grander possession for any Christian life than the transparently simple mechanism of a sincerely obeying heart. And if we could keep the machinery clear, there would be lives in thousands doing God's will on earth even as it is done in heaven.

There would be God in many a man's career whose soul is allowed to drift—a useless thing to God and the world—with every changing wind of life, and many a noble Christian character rescued from wasting all its virtues on itself and saved for work for Christ.

And when the time of trial would come, and all in earth and heaven was dark and even God's love seemed dim, what is there ever left to cling to but this will of the willing heart, a God-given, God-ward bending

will, which says amidst the most solemn and perplexing vicissitudes of life,

“Father, I know that all my life,
Is portioned out by Thee,
And the changes that are sure to come
I do not fear to see:
But I ask Thee for a present mind,
Intent on pleasing Thee.”

